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ABSTRACT

A literate mind is the kind of mind people need to do their jobs well, to adjust as their jobs change, and to be able to change jobs when they need to or want to. This paper contends that today, not enough adults have this kind of literacy, nor are students learning it well enough. A literate mind matters in the following contexts: in changing jobs; communicating in society; and flourishing in the global village. Literate thinking is also defined as the ability to engage in the kinds of thinking and reasoning people use when they read and write even in situations where reading and writing are not involved. This view of literacy assumes individual and cultural differences and societal changes over time. In addition to discussing a sociocognitive view of literacy, this paper touches on envisionment-building, literacy understanding, teachers' professional lives, test preparation, and a new study called Partnership for Literacy. (PM)

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The Literate Mind.

By Judith A. Langer

Distinguished Professor Reception 4/18/02.

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Distinguished Professor Reception 4/18/02

THE LITERATE MIND

Judith A. Langer

Throughout my professional career, my work has focused on how the literate mind develops – how people become rich thinkers and language users, good discussants and learners, and how they become able to manage well in life and society. The kind of literate mind I care about involves the kind of thinking needed not only to do well in school, but outside of school - in work and life. It is the kind of mind people need to do their jobs well, to adjust as their jobs change, and to be able change jobs when they need or want to. Today, not enough adults have this kind of literacy, nor are students learning it well enough. And, too often the students and their families, rather than the system, are blamed.

Why does a literate mind matter?

Changing Jobs. Shifting economies, particularly influenced by new technologies, are changing the jobs people do. As businesses and industries remake themselves or close, adults, often in their prime productive years and beyond, must learn new skills and knowledge. It has been projected that most young people of today can expect to change the type of work they do two or three times in their lifetime.

Communication Society. As we become more of a technological and communication society, literacy demands become more specialized and more complex – issues of language and literacy gain prominence, and the need for a literate mind becomes more essential. Some educational economists fear that we are moving toward a more bifurcated society, where the options in life will be determined during the years at school, and those who fail to gain the higher literacies will be relegated to a class of jobs that will be harder to break out of. Their choices will be fewer.

Global Village. Communities, schools, and individual classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. With job changes and dreams of a better future, people move from one region of the country to another – and from one part of the world to another. With this, the range of languages, cultural traditions, and beliefs about schooling keeps growing. In some major cities, minority students make up the majority student population, in sheer numbers.

These are some of the issues that concern me. Through my research, I try to help lay a foundation for an educational system that can do the most for everyone, to help all students gain the most agile and literate minds to carry them through life.

Over the years, among other things, I have studied:

- the role existing knowledge plays in how understanding develops;
- the development of reading and writing across the school year;
- the environments in which reading, writing, thinking are best learned;
- how thinking and learning are shaped by writing and reading;
- the kinds of literacy involved in learning academic subjects;
- the differences between literary and logical thinking and how they both contribute to intelligent thought; and
- how each of these can be taught and learned most effectively to and by all students.

There are three large theoretical concepts I have been developing over the past 25 years. At first, they were the focus of my research, but over time, they have been absorbed into the theoretical foundations that underlie my work. I continue to refine them based on my new work. They help us rethink educational improvement.

Literate Thinking

I see being literate as the ability to behave like a literate person – to engage in the kinds of thinking and reasoning people generally use then they read and write even in situations where reading and writing are not involved (such as the ability to inspect and analyze meanings from a variety of vantage points with or without texts – whether they have seen a movie or read a play, the mental act itself is a literate act). I call this ability "literate thinking."

This view of literacy assumes individual and cultural differences and societal changes over time. It suggests that people use what they know and have experienced as a starting place for learning. It lets them start by manipulating their knowledge of content and their knowledge of language in ways that help them think and rethink their understandings. From this perspective, thinking and awareness are learned in the context of ideas and activities. My studies show that students who use literate thinking when no text is present can more easily learn to use it *with* text as well.

This is a very different notion of literacy than thinking of literacy as the acquisition of a set of reading and writing skills and facts; and what one values as being smart and learning well, as well as how to teach and how you test it, are very different, as well.

Sociocognitive View of Literacy

Although we all think we know what literacy is, it's a slippery term. It has no meaning in any but a specific sense, in a social and situational sense, at a given place at a given point in time. So, from the outset, I will tell you that any statistics you read about literacy are likely to be misleading, although not necessarily intentionally so. Literacy needs to be understood in terms of time and place and people, communication systems, and technologies and values – and these are always changing.

By a sociocognitive view of literacy, I mean that literacy learning is an essentially social enterprise, where the uses of literacy grow from the social environments in which they are seen. And the mind learns to work, to think and reason and discuss, in ways that are particular to those purposes and situations. We learn not only the uses of literacy but also what is valued, what is considered successful.

The social context and uses affect not only the *kinds* of literacy we use, but the kinds of knowledge we are after and also the strategies we use to get there; how we think. Within social settings, people learn to manipulate the tools of language (pen, books, computers) in ways they see them used; they learn certain strategies and ways of thinking to gain certain kinds of knowledge and not others.

This view has great implications for understanding the kinds of literate knowledge students come to school with and for also understanding the range of experiences they need to have at school. It means that if we want students to become more highly literate, the social context of education – what is valued, how people interact about it, and how things get done – all need to change.

Envisionment-Building

In the past, we have treated comprehension as a building block process, where new ideas are attached to old ones, leading to some built-up understanding of a whole set of ideas. But my research shows that it does not work that way. Understandings grow and change and spiral and become transmuted. And some ideas we have at one point in time are gone in another. We don't merely add information.

I use the term envisionment to refer to the world of understanding we have at one point in time, when we are reading, writing or thinking. Such as at this point in this talk. Your envisionment represents your understanding right now. You might be thinking, "This isn't the work I thought Judith did. What *is* she talking about?" But as I continue my talk, your envisionments of the bigger research picture that I am trying to share with you will like change and grow.

Each envisionment includes what you do and do not understand about what I am saying, as well as your momentary hunches about how the whole will unfold, and your reactions to it. Envisionments are text worlds in the mind, and differ from person to person. They are a function of your experiences, what you know relative to the situation, and what you are after. Envisionments are always in a state of change, as new ideas, information or experiences come to mind – even after you have completed the overt literary experience. The implications of this notion for assessment as well as teaching are vast.

These three concepts: the literate mind, a sociocognitive view of literacy, and envisionment-building underlie all the research I do. And one newer body of research has begun to be absorbed into my larger theoretical conceptions of literacy.

Literary Understanding

Literature is the most underestimated subject of study in schools. It plays a critical role in our lives by helping us reflect on ourselves and the world, but coming to understand it also involves the mind in making sense – it involves a set of cognitive strategies that are useful for the sharp and fully literate mind.

My studies show that logical and literary thinking are quite different. The content is different, but so are the strategies we use to make sense of each. In logical thinking, we ask questions and refine our understandings in order to narrow in on and build a fuller understanding of ideas or thoughts or knowledge we are after; and in literary thinking, we ask questions and seek meanings that go beyond what we can imagine. This act changes not only our understanding at the moment but also our ideas about where our understandings might go – how the piece or situation might end.

This distinction makes a major contribution to our notion of literacy. We have clear ways of thinking and talking about scientific, mathematical, or logical reasoning but none to talk about literary reasoning. Yet literary reasoning is used all the time. For example, research shows that when doctors make diagnoses, if their logical thinking doesn't get them to a solution, they create scenarios and tell stories. From my perspective, they engage in literary thinking. Both are ways of thinking that we use and value in our everyday lives and at work all the time. So, too, do students. But at school, we primarily teach and value logical thinking. This rules out a lot of good thinking and problem-solving that could be learned. This concept of literary thinking is a useful aspect of high literacy for all of us, including students.

Thus, my research has been twofold. On the one hand, I am a theory builder, developing and testing out concepts such as how the literate mind works that can underlie the ways in which we conceive of educational needs and educational reform. On the other hand, I also do research in schools to develop pedagogy that can guide educational approaches as well as goals. I haven't said much about my school research yet, but I have been in schools studying every area I have already described. To close my talk today, I am going to tell you about the study I most recently completed and the one we have underway.

Beating the Odds

I call the five year study I've just completed my "Beating the Odds" study. The findings were just published by NCTE, in a book called *Effective Literacy Instruction*. I began this study based in the conceptual framework I have just described because I was very concerned about helping schools get through this high stakes testing era while also wanting to help students gain the higher literacy I think counts.

The study took place in 88 diverse communities in 4 states. All schools were trying to help their students do well, and had good reputations for trying. But only some of the schools were consistently doing better than schools like them, with comparable demographics. I had 2 research questions: 1) How did the teachers' professional lives differ in the two settings? and 2) How did the instruction differ? The differences are remarkable, and have gotten quite a lot of attention across the country because they deal with a very hot issue.

I will tell you just two of the broad findings to give you a sense of the kinds of things we've learned. You'll see they run counter to some everyday assumptions, and counter to what many schools are doing

Teachers' Professional Lives. In schools that beat the odds, teachers live highly collaborative and professionally involved lives. They keep up with their students needs, they stay current in their fields, and they keep an ear to the public. The professionals use this high stakes testing era as an opportunity to do what they always want to do - improve student learning. And when they get improvement, they examine what else they need to do and up the ante.

The more typical schools try hard, but are more hierarchical, even when they try not to be. Even if teachers serve on committees, in the end administrators and supervisors decide what the curriculum will be, what programs the students need and what professional development the teachers need. The teachers are recipients and enactors of someone else's decisions. Also, both the administrators and teachers in these less successful schools consider the high stakes tests to be a hurdle - something to be gotten over for the moment. When the tests are over, they then anticipate a level run; they don't reexamine and set new goals until something goes wrong.

Test Preparation. They also prepare students to do well on tests differently. The schools that beat the odds analyze the tests their students are required to take, then decide which literacy skills and knowledge students need to do well *not only* on these tests but in their course work in general and in life, and ensure that these are integrated into the everyday class work. They're after high literacy - including, but *extending beyond* the tests. They brush up on the test format a few weeks before the test, but do not spend most of the year practicing for the test.

In comparison, the more typical schools work very hard at another kind of test preparation. Because the spotlight is on the scores, they think that more and more practice on test-like content and formats will get their students through. Many lower performing schools have replaced much of their usual curriculum with test practice. The conceptual "meat" is gone. They mean well, but get more limited results, both on the tests and in helping their students gain higher literacy. And when the tests change, they are in trouble. These are just tastes of the many findings from my Beating the Odds studies that have been very useful in thinking about changes that need to be made if we want to improve student learning. (You can read about these findings in greater detail as well as other findings in the NCTE book, or in papers on the CELA website.)

Partnership for Literacy

And this leads into our present study, the Partnership for Literacy. It is a major intervention study I am doing with Arthur Applebee and our colleagues Marty Nystrand and Adam Gamoran at the University of Wisconsin. We are working in schools where students are not doing as well as they might, trying to put an instructional development program into place that can change both teachers' and students' knowledge, based on what we've learned works from our previous studies. This means that all the concepts I've discussed today, and more, need to be put into place, practically and seamlessly.

We're about 8 months into the project and things are going really well. We hope to have some initial findings from this study sometime next year.

I have only told you about some of my work, but I hope you can see that I've tried to use my research as a way to change our basic understandings about the literate mind and how to teach literacy - to offer new vantage points from which to understand what people know, how and why they learn as they do, and how to help them become more literate.

I've tried to offer some new concepts that can make real changes in how schools conceive of and organize for learning and how students and teachers can work together to make it happen.

Above all, I hope these changes can help nurture the kinds of students who have, what I call literate minds. Of course I want them to pass the high stakes tests (this is important to them in our society, at this time), but I want so much more than that. I also want them to have choices – to be able to gain knowledge and learn new skills throughout their lives, to explore possibilities and ponder options as they shape and reshape their own lives and the world around them.

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